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ABSTRACT

Over the years, a composition instructor has watched the metaphor of the writing center as a spider web unfold on three different college campuses, all of which have a culturally diverse student body. As a junior college peer tutor, a graduate student tutor, and a faculty member trying to get out of doing some committee work, the instructor has seen the center from many different angles. From all of these angles, one thing remains the same: the instructor learns just as much from the writers who visit the center as they learn from the instructor. The writings of three different students who visited the writing center show they are unified by their sentiment and by their listener (the tutor). By sharing their ideas, histories, and stories with the instructor, these student writers change tutors' ideas, histories, and stories. They have reached the instructor despite their supposed "otherness." These writers have woven their words into the center (the writing center and the metaphorical spider web's center) and their effects reverberate out from it so far that where or if the reverberations end cannot be seen. Each story may stand alone as a particular strand, but together these stories manifest an elaborate web. (RS)

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The Tutor at the Center: Hearing and Reverberating the Stories of a Multi-Cultural Campus

Let me begin with a story.

When I was a little girl, a big spider had crafted an elaborate web outside my grandmother's door. As a child, my first thought was to question it: How did she do that, Grandma? At five, I was already in love with Charlotte, the gray spider from E.B. White's book, *Charlotte's Web*. She wove words like "Terrific" and "Miracle" into her web in order to save her friend's life, her friend Wilbur the pig. Therefore, all spiders were Charlotte to me. All spiders, in some way, are still Charlotte to me.

My grandma reminded me of the spinnerets and other spider parts that made it possible for the spider to craft such a beautiful mechanism. We counted the strands and noted how each one connected to another in some way. Somehow, all of them came to the center and were unified there to make the web strong and sturdy. My grandma made sure to point out that we should be thankful to the spider, because her web would catch a good number of the wasps that had been getting through the screen door and stinging grandpa during his afternoon naps.

Grandma closed the door and suggested we leave the spider to her work. "She's got a lot more thinking and weaving to do," my grandma said. And I thought to myself how big and beautiful and fuzzy she was -- the spider, not my grandma.

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Today I'm here to share with you a few different strands of a bigger web. Each strand stands alone. Each strand performs its own function. Each strand meets at the Center. The strands I'd like to share are the works of different writers. These writers and their works have made their way to the Center. Their voices are different. Their words are different. Their stories are unique to their experiences and their histories. One idea remains the same: they write and they come to the Center to have their voices heard. The Writing Center. . . what a miraculous idea.

Over the years, I have watched this metaphor unfold on three different college campuses, all of which have a culturally diverse student body. As a junior college peer tutor, a graduate student tutor, and a faculty member trying to get out of doing some committee work, I have seen the Center from many different angles. From all of these angles, one thing remains the same: I learn just as much from the writers who visit the Center as they learn from me. Despite the diversity of the writers' stories, I learn from them. Well, let me correct that -- I should say that it is precisely because of these writers' diverse stories that I have learned so much and seen so far beyond my grandmother's back door.

This is my experience. It is my story and I thank you for letting me share. My story, though it stands alone and apart from all others because I have written it -- and will probably never write it exactly the same way ever again, is also part of the web about which I speak. It has been fed and supported by many other stories and histories. Between revisions of this piece, I would think back to other writers who have come to the Center. I would think back to other strands that have reverberated in my mind and seek something from them.

I'd like for you to see the words the voice of one such writer. His name is Mark Hall and the excerpt that follows is from a collaborative essay, wherein each member of a writer's group wrote one paragraph. The topic was their own, and to my pleasant surprise, the essay was on multi-cultural issues and the different stories that can come out of a diverse group of people. After each writer wrote one paragraph, he or she was supposed to take the other writers' paragraphs home and create an essay out of the individual parts. This writer and this piece have been to the Writing Center. Here it is, reverberating back out from that Center, for you to read. Mark's version of this essay is titled "America, one nation, many brothers:"

> With a plethora of nationalities, America remains one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. There are literally hundreds of minorities that can be found on the largest city block, to the smallest hometown. To truly understand America is to know the ways of the western world, and the culture and customs of others as well. A large piece of American history can be attributed to the influx of a variety of different minorities; each one brought with them their own anomalies, with respect to culture and customs. In the paragraphs that follow, you will hear the voice of five individual people, all of who [sic] have different stories to tell. They briefly describe what they feel brought their ancestral forefathers over hundreds, even thousands of miles, not knowing someday that they would play a part, no matter how small, in the history of America. " (Hall 1).

During my years at graduate school, I read a lot of theories that touched on or danced around this issue of diversity and unity, particularism and universalism (or any other catch phrase there may be by now for the inherent paradox that develops when diverse groups of people come together). We yearn for acceptance yet we don't want to sacrifice our individual identities. One culture critic who writes about this issue at length happens to stick out most in my mind, and particularly one line of his. Bill Readings wrote that "[j]ust because you have a voice doesn't mean you're not mute" (Readings 181).

"Just because you have a voice doesn't mean you're not mute."

Readings was writing specifically about a scene from a movie called *Where the Green Ants Dream*. In it, a group of aboriginal Australian men tried to fend off some white Australian miners from mining on the land that they called their home. A court process ensued in order for someone to lay claim on the land. As part of this scene in the movie, the audience found out that one of the Aboriginal men was the sole survivor of a culture for which the language was no longer spoken by anyone, even his Aboriginal neighbors. When he spoke, no one heard. According to Readings, he was entirely incommensurable to everyone. He only spoke in the old language and not the new and so his stories went unheard.

Readings' essay, "Pagans, Perverts, and Primitives: Justice in the Empire of Capital," works through a radical notion of particularism in multi-cultural studies. It places cultures so far apart from one another that Readings begins to see no connectives at all between them. He calls for a need to invoke an "incalculable difference" and to "relinquish the concept of human" altogether (186). By calling all people human,

according to Readings, we define them in our own terms and leave no room for them to define themselves. He criticizes another theorist by the name of Burrdridge who insists on a "'reach into otherness,' [which] demands that we must learn from [people of other cultures] just as much (or almost) as much as they learn from us" (186).

Readings denounces this 'reach into otherness,' yet as I have stated before, I have learned from those people to whom I have listened, people of other cultures. I have learned from them precisely *because* of the different stories they have to tell and the different ways in which they choose to tell those stories. While theorists such as Bill Readings would argue that there is incommensurability between these stories due to their different cultural contexts, I would argue that the very fact that they have a common audience makes them commensurable.

Their histories are different; their words are different; their choices of syntax are different. Yet, these voices are placed – in the present essay -- upon one page together. They are unified by their sentiment and by their listener -- the tutor at the Center. By sharing their ideas, histories, and stories with me -- their Writing Center tutor -- these writers are changing my ideas, my history, and my stories. I have learned from them. They have reached me despite my supposed 'otherness' and I have been affected.

Another visitor to a different Writing Center is a woman named Ann Marie Schorr. After hearing that Elie Weisel was coming to the Suffolk County Community College campus, Ann Marie got to thinking back. She remembered an old man named Izzy who was a rich part of her childhood. In her piece called "The Tattoo," she remembers Izzy's story. She also, in the process, remembers her own story:

The fifties was a decade of pleasantness and not remembering. A time for a man to heal. If he could forget, maybe it never happened but it did happen and they forget to tell us.

I was a baby boomer, growing up in a small section of Queens, Jackson Hights. There were two family, semi-detached houses on one side of the block and single family homes across the street. Each section within our town had clusters of ethnic groups that bordered on one another in tranquil harmony.

Everyday on our way home from elementary school, my sister, my cousins, and myself would stop at the candy store to spend our ten cents. The store was owned by Izzy and Dora, a married Jewish couple. Dora was plain, plump, pleasant, and covered with a shroud of sadness. Izzy was thin, sweet, kind, patient and welcomed us into his establishment with charm and grace. We loved him! He made the best chocolate egg creams and lime rickys. If I close my eyes and go back in time, I am sitting at the counter, sipping on a straw, trying to suck up the last drop. The slurping so loud, the foam so fluffy, nothing else like it in the world.

On an extremely hot August day, as I was sipping my soda and eating a Baby Ruth, I noticed a tattoo of numbers on Izzy's arm. I stared in amazement. I had never noticed it before that moment. How could this be I wondered? I see Izzy everyday. How could I have missed his tattoo? My father has a tattoo with a red rose and 'Mother' written under it. I struggled to control my curiosity, but it overwhelmed me.

"Izzy, is that a tattoo on your arm? What is it? I have never seen that before today!"

Izzy quickly rolled down his sleeve and said, "It's nothing."

"But Izzy, it has to mean something. My father's tattoo means something."

But he would never tell me. No one would tell me.

Many years later after Izzy died, I learned about the Gestapo, Hitler, Himmler, and the Death Camps. How human beings were tattooed, logged in record books and annihilated like barnyard animals. Oh, Izzy. I am sorry you were in a Concentration Camp. What horrors you must have seen? The Third Reich, who wanted the world to forget the Jews, has kept Izzy and his tattoo alive in me for over forty years. Izzy, a man who remembered how to be kind to children of all nationalities and religions, inspite of the hatred and atrocities he endured and witnessed.

No wonder you did not want to tell me. Were you afraid you would scare me? I am sure that was your reason but you should have told me. I would have thrown my arms around you and told you if the Nazi's ever come again, I would hide you in my house. I would never, never have let them take you away. I did not have the chance to tell Izzy and Izzy never gave me the opportunity."

Although Izzy never told his story, Izzy is no longer voiceless.

These memories are different. The people remembering them are different individuals with different sets of life experiences. They are particular and unique. Each

voice resonates on its own with great wisdom and strength. I have listened and responded to each of them. I have learned from them and so I share them.

They are not incommensurable. Just like Charlotte's web, these writers have woven their words into the Center and their effects reverberate out from it so far we cannot even see where or if the reverberations end. Each story may stand alone as a particular strand, but together these stories manifest an elaborate web. I like to imagine an acrobatic spider doing what anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, writes in one of the essays from his book *Local Knowledge*: "[h]opping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another" (Geertz 69).

The spider does this hopping back and forth action. She thinks, weaves, and constructs a mechanism in which the whole is understood to exist *because* of its component parts; at the same time, it is the notion of a fully constructed web which motivates her to be the acrobat she needs to be in order to complete her work. The whole and its parts are in balance with one another. The tutor does this hopping back and forth action, also. The tutor listens, responds, and encourages in-coming writers in an effort to create a place for people of all cultures and backgrounds to come and share their words. The tutor also understands that it is precisely because of the diversity of these writers' works that the Writing Center even exists.

As a tutor, I hear many stories. I remember them and now I have shared a few of them with you. Remember them. Perhaps they will reverberate and become woven into *your* Centers. The Writing Center. . . what a miraculous idea.

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